

# The Detroit News

## Tax injustice hurts religious schools

BY KEVIN SCHMIESING

Catholics in Metro Detroit were shocked recently by the news that eight of the region's Catholic high schools were slated to close. The announcement adds to a growing trend: 136 Catholic schools across the country were shuttered in 2004.

In part, these closings reflect the ebb and flow of demographics. As inner-city schools' primary clientele have moved out of urban areas, the thicket of parishes and schools designed to serve a densely packed urban Catholic population are no longer viable. Meanwhile, new suburban schools are being built, and many have waiting lists.

But demographics are not the whole story. Nationwide, Catholic school enrollment has been decreasing, even as the population of Catholics continues to increase. A number of factors could be adduced in explanation, but economics is a critical one.

The cost of tuition at Catholic schools has increased 37 percent during the past five years. While it is true that median incomes have also increased, income increases have not kept up with tuition rates. In short, parochial schooling costs more now than it did 10 years ago, and the trend shows no signs of reversing.

Among poor families, of course, private schooling has usually been an unaffordable luxury; these trends additionally price an increasing number of working-class students out of the market. Yet students from challenging backgrounds arguably benefit most from what religious

schools have to offer. The positive impact of religious schools on troubled and poorly performing students is well documented.

In addition to failing public school systems and expensive private schools, many parents -- religious and otherwise -- are turning to alternatives such as charter schools and homeschooling.

Despite these options, the economic bind that religious schools and their students increasingly find themselves in highlights an injustice at the heart of education. Parents who elect to send their children to religious schools must support financially two educational systems -- the religious one and the state one -- while parents who send their children to state schools pay only one fee.

This injustice could be redressed in many ways. Vouchers have been tried with some success in various places, but were rejected by voters in Michigan five years ago. Tax relief, in the form of federal or local exemptions or deductions, would probably be better, minimizing the possibility of government meddling in religious education.

In any case, the status quo must be changed.

It is not as though the present system is one of outstanding efficiency. Public discontent with the educational return on public investment is well known. A January 2005 poll found that only 36 percent of Americans thought the education system "works pretty well," while 62 percent said it "needs major changes" or must be "completely rebuilt."

Meanwhile, school districts

around the country continue to bombard taxpayers with millage increases, even as Americans consider local property taxes the tax they "dislike the most" -- more than income tax, sales tax and Social Security tax -- and states increasingly resort to gambling revenue (lotteries and casinos) to shore up their education budgets.

Even so, the viability of the system depends on a large number of parents opting out and paying out of pocket for religious or other private education. That religious parents are made to sacrifice for the sake of their children's well-being may have a certain salutary effect. But government's job is not to craft structures that help set apart religious people by adding to their burdens. It is, instead, to maintain public order and expedite the pursuit of the good by enforcing a rule of law that treats people equitably.

Enabling parents to choose schools according to the best interests of their children would probably help keep more Catholic schools in business. The appeal of school choice should extend, though, to those who have no particular interest in religious schools. It promotes responsibility-taking among parents and students and heightens schools' accountability.

In other words, it not only permits religious parents to train their children without added expense; it spurs everyone to the pursuit of excellence.

---

*Kevin Schmiesing is a research fellow and director of the Catholic High School Honor Roll at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids.*